



## Research Article

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## How can Arts-Based Educational Research be Emancipatory? Insights from Three Research Projects

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Doi: 10.2478/jesr-2018-0037

### Abstract

*In this article I discuss the nature of arts-based research. Based on what relevant research says, I acknowledge that this research approach is built on different assumptions and seeks to enhance people critical consciousness. Three arts-based research projects were reviewed. Findings indicate how arts-based research helps individuals understand their realities and move towards desired change.*

**Keywords:** Arts-based research, educational research, oppression, emancipation

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, art is seen as pedagogy. It is believed that art is a human activity permeating all aspects of our lives, and its significance is no longer confined to its aesthetic value, but rather to letters that art helps us in understanding the world. Singing, drama, film, theater, dancing, sculpture and visual arts play a prominent role in understanding our culture and the cultures of others.

Among the various significances of arts is their relation to the other humanities. According to Martine and Jacobus (2004), arts are “closely related to the other humanities, especially history, philosophy, and theology” (p.456). There is no doubt that education is another discipline that we can add to those mentioned.

Eisner (1985, 1991) and Vallance (1975) were among the most prominent advocates of understanding the educational practice aesthetically from a purely artistic perspective. Eisner (1985, 1991) considered learning as an aesthetic experience that can be judged in light of its totalism, consistency, expressive language and promoting of learner's feelings and emotions. The teacher, like the painter and sculptor, is an artist who can “taste” these qualities through what Eisner called “connoisseurship”. Vallance (1975) acknowledged that artistic work and pedagogy have common characteristics, both human and a communication tool between the author (curriculum) and the recipient audience (teachers and students). In this sense, we can apply the principles of aesthetic criticism to judge educational practices.

Eisner (1991) assumed that knowledge is better assimilated when represented by a variety of representations: “there are multiple ways in which the world can be known. Artists, writers, and dancers, as well as scientists, have important things to tell about the world” (Eisner, 1991.p. 7). Any educational practice has its particularities that could not be observed unless we consider the principle of knowledge multiple representations. Accordingly, many educational researchers investigated issues through purely dramatic treatments, establishing what is known arts-based research.

This article reported three research projects that used arts-based research to empower people and raise their critical consciousness, a concept that was well explained by Freire (1970, 1973).

According to Freire, students must be aware of social, political and economic contexts that

shape their identities through series of reflections and actions that are completely based on dialogue: "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (Freire, 1970, p.81).

From this Freirean perspective, many education researchers had used arts-Based research to address issues of oppression, marginalization and social inequity. Through connections, active engagement, imagination and sensory experience, arts-based research prompts aesthetic learning experiences that awaken students and teachers' capacities for social justice (Kraehe & Brown, 2011).

## **2. The Nature of Arts-Based Research**

Educational research is witnessing a real crisis represented in two propositions: the dominance of research methodologies (Lather, 1986; Scotland, 2012) that have been followed for long time, and the decline of its social relevance (Carspecken, 2005). Ball & Forzani (2007) put it clearly: "education research is plagued by skeptics who doubt its quality and relevance". This has led educational researchers to consider different methodologies that take into account unusual philosophical assumptions to make educational research socially more relevant.

It is believed that what counts as knowledge and the nature of educational research have changed as a result of the emersion of many approaches with different assumptions, such as feminism, post-structuralism, critical theory and semiotics (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). Among the considered assumptions these approaches have taken into account is the aesthetic dimension of experiences, where the educational research exists at the intersection of arts and science

Depending on what research says, Eaves (2014) stated that arts-based research is concerned with using expressive qualities of form to convey meaning, enlarge human understandings, and deliver new insights and values. She added that it is useful for empowering people. Greenwood (2012) reported three arts-based projects claiming that this research approach may produce holistic kinds of knowing that result through the use of art tools and aesthetic analysis.

Leavy (2017) argued that arts-based research is "a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research context". Relying on philosophical assumptions that see arts able to convey truths and values through different ways of knowing, arts-based research, Leavy stated, provides new insights and learning, helps in building connections between micro and macro levels, and establishes critical consciousness and awareness.

These advantages invite many new scholars, particularly in the field of education, to consider arts-based research as a research methodology (Sinner et al, 2006). In his analysis, Rolling (2010) stated that arts-based research is "post-positivist and epistemically antifoundational in an era still dominated by traditional scientific research".

## **3. Dennis's Theater of Oppressed**

The original idea of Theater of the Oppressed was found by Augusto Boal in the 1950s and 1960s. His book "The Theater of the Oppressed" was first published in 1975 and translated from Spanish to English.

In the fourth chapter of his book, Boal (2008) talked about Theater of the Oppressed as an adverse to the bourgeois theater which is usually ends with the curtain being closed without raising issues of justice and empowerment, while the theater of oppressed seems endless and raise questions about emancipation and liberation through continuous dialogue and debate.

Boal put the idea of "forum theater" to refer to a collection of short scenes that explain to the public a situation of marginalization or oppression. Each scene is followed by an intense dialogue about the scene. The audience is given opportunities to participate in reformulating a scene after reflecting on an idea or issue. In fact, the forum theater aims to empower the public and increase its critical awareness seeking to convey an important message that there are options and alternatives that we can do when we want change.

(Dennis, 2009) used Theater of the Oppressed as a method in its research which aimed to

identify aspects of bullying practiced against newcomer students with non-American origin in an American school. The intellectual basis of Denise is that educational research is not educational unless it addresses the issues of oppression and marginalization.

Dennis grouped the newcomer students in four groups, Mexican, Japanese, Taiwanese and Palestinian. Each group was interviewed for many hours through which students declared that they were unwanted at school. Their white colleagues were hurt in school lounges, insisting on addressing them with humiliating descriptions, so a new student said that he preferred death to passing through these daily experiences.

Denise profoundly observed life in that school stating that the purpose of her research was to expose the aspects of oppression and marginalization in daily school life in order to reach transformational acts that could initiate change. Thus, the purpose of her critical research was not to reproduce or represent the life of an environment through external observers, but rather to indulge in that environment to understand and change the lives of each individual.

For example, her work included a scene in which students move from one classroom to another. Through walking together down the hall, two Latino students were intercepted by three white students. In spite of there is a teacher monitoring, the white students contemptuously said: "Speak English or go home." "Get out of here, you dirty Mexicans."

This scene was repeated many times, and each time the teacher was unable to prevent the oppression of the new students. This angered Denis, who stated that the teachers were part of the process of oppression, but they did not realize this. This reminds us of Paulo Freire (1970) who stated that the oppressor may unconsciously practice oppression. On one occasion, and based on Boal's idea of the forum theater, the public suggested that a white student be appeared to defend the new students.

Dennis's work took five years. She was successful in re-framing oppression and marginalization and in building deliberately true dialogue and brainstorming among the participants and the public. Dennis's findings were organized into two domains, those related to understanding newcomer students' experiences, and those related the teachers' role in perpetuating oppression. Dennis called this bold step towards change "collective transformation".

#### **4. Bagley & Castro-Salazar: Arts Synergy**

Bagley and Castro-Salazar (2012) emphasized that the aim of art-based research is to understand educationally human activity and to convince people through representing the educational phenomenon in a different way, because it is concerned with challenging the prevailing discourses and traditional ideas in society. and with revealing the experiences of those who are oppressed and marginalized so as to empower them and raise their voices by interrogating the collective memory they share.

Based on Critical Race Theory, Bagley and Castro-Salazar examined the experiences of students of Mexican origin who are known as "undocumented," some term politicians use to label individuals living in the United States illegally. These students have difficult educational conditions and are excluded from the curriculum discourse.

Bagley & Castro-Salazar chose a school in Arizona, where six students were interviewed in depth for thirty hours, allowing them to read narratives related to their histories and daily experiences. Students' narratives in the interviews were used to formulate dramatic texts or a play that revealed the students' reality. An artist was asked to transform these narratives into lyrics. A visual artist was invited to draw a painting that reflected these narratives. The painting describes the border between Mexico and the United States, showing Mexicans suffering due to the racist acts white people practice against them. In addition, a popular Mexican singing band was asked to participate in expressing what the students said.

These artistic events, singing, painting, and folklore brought together a message expressed by the six students: how they feel oppressed and marginalized. This message was the beginning of a journey towards critical awareness for teachers and students alike.

What is confirmed by the work of Bagley & Castro-Salazar is that arts-based research is concerned with reflection on lived experiences and highlighting the cases of individuals' empathy to

challenge the dominant culture standards, values and beliefs. Consequently, this type of research provides a cultural space for understanding and reflection.

## **5. Woo's Film: The Journey**

It is believed that film has become the most popular art form around the world (Martin & Jacobus, 2004). Many scholars consider movies as cultural texts that can reshape individuals' identity. Among the most famous who are concerned with cinematic criticism is Henry Giroux (1997, 2008). From cultural studies point of view, Giroux (2011) claimed that under the regime of neo-liberalism; inequality, commodification, uncertainties, collective induced anxieties, and social irresponsibility have become commonplace.

From the same point of view, Shaheen (2001), Kincheloe and Steinberg (2004), and Cooley (2009) investigated how Hollywood establishes a racist, nihilist and gender-unbalanced discourses. In her discerning work "The Hollywood curriculum: Teachers in movies", Dalton (2007) focused on teachers' images in Hollywood, she stated that the portrayal of teachers in Hollywood movies is decontextualized and leaves the educational institution intact and dominant.

(Woo, 2008) inspired the idea of the impact of media on individuals in writing and directing a cinematic script in collaboration with one of her colleagues. The idea of the film emerged after Woo prepared qualitative educational research during her graduate studies on the concept of citizenship among a sample of young people in Singapore and New York. The script was based on extensive interviews with a wide range of young people in the two cities. Titled "Singapore Dreaming ", the film speaks of a stereotyped Singaporean family of a mother, father, son, daughter and daughter-in-law. The film shows parents' bias toward the son despite his academic failure. The family is lucky when the father won the Lottery award, but the father dies without enjoying the award, half of which goes to pay huge debts spent on educating the son.

What did Woo say in this film? From the perspective of Singapore, the film illustrates who the neo-liberal policy has rooted social class in society. From feminism perspective, the film illustrates the prevalence of societal biases in favor of males, which leads to the emergence of oppression and marginalization. From a post-colonial perspective, the film shows how Singapore has become an American model in terms of lifestyle and economic policy.

## **6. Reflections and Conclusion**

While investigating what is meant by "emancipatory" research, I found that this kind of research comes as one of critical pedagogy implications. I wish to report four characteristics that make an educational research "emancipatory". The first is that it must confront injustice in society and becomes transformative endeavor. Secondly, it must consider "emancipation" from two angles, helping individuals understand their selves and their realities, and eliminating the traditional methodologies followed in education research.

The third is that it is crucial not to consider the researcher as a substitute for the participants, but rather with them side by side, motives them to be active, as the goal of the the research is to liberate and emancipate them. Lather (1986) called this familiarity "reciprocity". Reciprocity reaches its maximum when researcher and participants mutually exchange theorizing (meanings and interpretations).

The fourth characteristic is concerned with what Lather (1986) called "systematized reflexivity", a term refers to individuals' ability to replace an old theory with new more responsive one. The more research participants are able to understand the reality of their circumstances and struggle to change it, the more the research is catalytically valid.

Catalytic validity is the appropriate response to Cahnmann-Taylor & Seigsmund (2008) who claimed that "there are few measurements of quality in arts-based research...(it) is at risk for an "anything goes" criteria, making it impossible to distinguish what is excellent from what is amateur" (p.11).

In Dennis's work, the catalytic validity was named "collective transformation". Dennis showed many examples explaining how individuals achieved this kind of transformation: "the teachers were

able to identify mechanisms and myths that seems to keep the oppressive relationships in place. They were also able to begin to identify what their roles in the oppressive relationships were”.

Similarly, Bagley and Castro-Salazar acknowledged that their work was able to represent individuals’ historical selves which helps them uncover unequal power relations through providing them with multiple meanings, interpretations and voice associated with lived diversity: “arts-based research in education is able to politically move subjects, performers, audience and researchers into new cultural spaces of understanding, resistance and hope”.

Woo’s journey from research study into movie explained explicitly how “Singapore Dreaming” was able to uncover many critical topics, and how it “seduce(s) the audience to consider issues such as materialism, the way we exclude certain members of society, women’s knowledge, and the alienating conditions of postmodernity.”

The findings of the the reviewed researches have shown that art-based research is an opportunity to uncover aspects of oppression and marginalization, and to enable individuals to have a critical awareness helps them understand the political and economic contexts that shape their identities. What I said earlier in this paper regarding considering art as a human practice that helps us understand our reality has been confirmed. Arts-based research is pure emancipatory practice. It emancipates us from the clutches of the traditional methodologies that we have handed over for a long period of time. It frees participants from the current situation that limits their humanity. When the purpose of educational research is such noble one, then we can talk about social relevance of educational research.

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